

LEONARD ROSEN

THE
KORTELISY
ESCAPE

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For Linda. Again and again.

[B]ut this frightened me most, that the Angels gathered up several, and left me behind.

—JOHN BUNYAN, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

THE THREE ROSES

One: Grace Larson

The first time . . . the first time was when I stole Mrs. Del-Rey's lipstick.

She and Mr. Del-Rey must have flipped through the availables list like they were buying a used car or a washing machine from a catalogue. As we were driving back to their house, they sat in the front seat discussing my cheek bones, which they thought were well formed, and my hair, which they decided was too straight and in need of curling. I was four. Two weeks later, they were stuffing me into party dresses with crinolines and painting blush on my cheeks. They taught me to use Junior Miss lipstick, how to make that popping sound with my lips as I blotted away the extra on old envelopes. Mrs. Del-Rey even promised I could wear her very own "Fuchsia" by Maybelline on my next birthday.

When I didn't place in the Medford, Massachusetts, Tots Pageant or in States the following spring, the Del-Reys gave me back. Stealing wasn't a question of right or wrong at that point. All I knew was that I'd been promised something I would never get, so I rummaged through Mrs. Del-Rey's makeup kit before they hurried me out the door.

The second time was a belt. Mr. Elliot made a living off his foster children. He kept five of us cycling through his house

in South Boston and was a big believer that discipline was the key to running a tight ship and developing good citizens. He would double up his leather belt and snap it to scare us into doing our chores with a smile. He never used the belt on me, but one day the DCF van came for us after the police found the oldest, Cameron, shivering beneath an I-93 overpass with welts across his back. I was five and knew exactly what I was doing when I stole Mr. Elliot's belt.

By the time they gave me to Mrs. Alcott nine years later, I had collected four more trophies of the homes I'd survived: Mr. Parker, the pervert (I stole his TV remote); Miss holy holy Carothers (the family Bible); the Daltons (a mini-bottle of rum—enough said); and the Healy sisters (a school photo of Alice, their first and—they'd never let me forget—*best* foster child). My rental parents called me moody. They didn't think I smiled enough or appreciated them sincerely enough. They complained I didn't talk at the dinner table. Each night I looked in the mirror wondering what was wrong with me.

One morning, Mrs. Alcott was peeling apples.

"Grace," she said. "No school today."

I hadn't heard of any holidays or teachers' meetings. "Are you sure?" I asked.

"Let's be quick about it. Go put on your dress."

I owned exactly one dress, which I wore to church and to DCF meetings when I was being trotted out to a new family. I understood what was coming and began looking around for something to steal.

Mrs. Alcott worked the paring knife in her brittle little hands, staring into the sink. "There's been a change," she sighed. "I thought it best to hold the news until this morning. No use upsetting the applecart."

This time, I was going to tell my case worker at the Department of Children and Families to put me in a motel and leave

me alone to write computer games, about my only pleasure in life aside from math class and social studies. I knew which motel too: in Boston's South End near the cathedral, where I could eat Chinese every night, walk to school, then come home to find my bed made.

"They say it's your grandfather—which I do *not* understand. Sweet Mother of God, the man's just getting out of prison. I swear, Grace. Blood or no blood, they wouldn't give you to a murderer. Would they?"

"You mean this wasn't your idea?"

She waved a letter. "There's no arguing a court order."

When my mother was alive, I visited someone she called Dad at the federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut. After she died, no one in the system wanted me visiting jails anymore. It had been ten years since I'd seen this man, and the fact I'd finally be raised by a family member was supposed to make a positive difference in my life. I didn't see how. I had exactly one memory of my grandfather—putting my hand to the glass in a visitors' room as my mother held me up to the window. She'd lost her hair from the treatments by that point. The man held his hand to the other side and reached for me as best he could. "That's your grandpa!" she said, sniffing.

"I sincerely hope this works out for you," said Mrs. Alcott, sprinkling brown sugar over her apples.

"Time for a sound clip!"

"Grace, enough with that thing. This is serious."

I left her standing in the kitchen with her rolling pin, the key, she claimed, to a flaky crust, and returned with my laptop. Earlier that year, I decided to record details of my foster care placements. With so many rental families, I was on track to set a record for the world's least-wanted child. Maybe if I'd been prettier. . . . I tried, but I was done painting and twisting myself into Mrs. Del-Rey's kind of pretty. I liked school

and did well, not that Mrs. Alcott noticed. Mainly she fussed over her miniature schnauzer. Each time she came home from work it was a reunion for the ages: "Daisy, Daisy! How's my little noodly noodles? You sweet thing, did you miss Mama? Come, give us a kiss!" Occasionally I got a *Did you remember to fold the laundry?* That counted as a good day.

"Turn your computer *off*," she said. "Always with the computer. Just stop and think about this. It's a big change for you."

As if I needed reminding. Getting booted back to DCF was a big deal, and now that I had a computer I wanted to record the moment. Who knew, maybe I'd write a long letter one day like those frontier women who kept journals about their adventures on the Great Plains. "Speak slowly and clearly," I said, wanting to catch every word. "Why didn't you tell me when you got the news?"

She waved the letter again, summoning us to the courthouse. "I told you, I don't believe in upsetting applearcarts. . . . It's a lot, I admit, your being fourteen with all this tumult in your life."

As we were leaving, she pointed to my jeans, which were ripped at the knees, and to my T-shirt and my red high tops and started in on the importance of first impressions. "Your dress would be so much nicer. I'll wait while you put it on." When I didn't move, a light must have clicked on in the withered orchard between her ears. She sighed as if she'd suddenly realized she'd be my foster mother for approximately one more hour.

"Well," she said. "At least we can pray."

"For what?"

"A good placement, for starters. For your grandfather to be a decent man, despite being a criminal. I read once that criminals can have good hearts. Let's pray for that. And just in case, let's ask God to cradle His special little lamb."

I couldn't help myself and started bleating. "Ba-ah-ah. Ba-ah-ah."

"Stop that!"

"Don't pray for me, Mrs. Alcott."

"Why for heaven's sake not?"

"Because I never got cradled. Ever. And I'm not anybody's lamb."

"Grace. Haven't I—?"

"I mean it. Don't."

Just the same, she closed her eyes and asked *Jeezus* to show me a little attention. Despite myself I joined her in a hearty *Amen* because in truth I wanted a good placement. I just didn't see why the Lord would take a personal interest. We packed the Camry and were setting off when I told her I forgot something and needed to go back inside.

Mostly I felt numb as I surveyed the kitchen in search of something to steal. My eyes settled on the rolling pin—a wicked choice, I realized, but I didn't care. I stuffed it into my pack. Thirty minutes later we were standing before a brick building with white columns and planters thick with daffodils. Mrs. Alcott was tugging at my sleeve.

"Don't be upset, dear."

The woman had no clue. Getting a new rental parent mattered to me about as much as stepping onto a different cross-town bus. Maybe this new bus, driven by someone with my same last name, would be less boring than my present bus. In the end, all it could ever be was a box on wheels taking me down the road to my eighteenth birthday, when the system would spit me out.

Mrs. Alcott leaned close to plant a kiss on my cheek.

She smelled of dead leaves and schnauzer. I leaned away.

Two: Nate Larson

If you like having time on your hands with a minimum of commitments, prison is just the place. They give you a cot, a toilet, a roof over your head, and food. Your only real job is to survive. The rest is easy.

I sat at the edge of my cot working two decks of cards, one in each hand, sliding the decks open and snapping them shut at different tempos. I flashed the backs of the cards, flashed the fronts, shut the fans, opened them, first right, then left. I heard a beat in my head: *Ha-cha-cha. Ha-cha-cha, Snap! Snap!* Once, I saw a flamenco dancer working a pair of lace fans as she lifted her arms and spun, making a whirlwind of her dress. I'll never forget it: red dress, black edging, black fans, black hair—her floor stomps like gunshots. She used her fans to hide and reveal her lips and eyes—but only when *she* decided. *Ha-cha-cha. Ha-cha-cha, Snap! Snap!*

Absolute mastery is a beautiful thing.

“Very nice, Larson. I hear you're putting on a magic show next week.”

A voice, a uniform, on the far side of my cage.

“Just my luck—on my day off! Maybe you'll show me a few tricks. My kid just got an Amazing Kreskin magic kit for her birthday. You know, the works all in one box: cape, wand that

turns into a scarf, top hat, and disappearing ink. Maybe you'll teach me a little something I can show her."

"Sure, Jim. No problem."

"C'mon. Your visitor's here."

I'd seen the woman I was to meet many times on the evening news and in the papers. She'd usually be standing behind a podium at the federal courthouse, backed by the Boston Harbor and a big blue sky. That a United States attorney would bother with me was some kind of joke. The woman could snap her fingers and summon the national press. She'd brought down politicians and hedge-fund billionaires. If she wanted a meeting, it could only be for one thing, and I wasn't interested.

Just the same I agreed, if only for the entertainment value.

The guard removed my cuffs and opened the door to a gray bunker of a room: no windows, only one door, which I hated. Hunt looked no different than she did on television, though she was shorter than I expected. She had hard blue eyes and a hard, thin little body. She wore a blue suit and was all angles, all cheekbone and chin and nose, her hair chopped. Handsome, boyish. Chilly. There was no denying she'd look good in political ads if she ran for governor one day. And, by God, she would have gotten my vote because she'd let her hair go gray. Any pol who did that *had* to be honest.

"I know why you're here," I told her. "Sorry I can't help."

She forced a smile. "And a big Department of Justice hello right back at you, Mr. Larson. I drove an hour from Boston for this meeting. If you've already decided to screw me, at least have the courtesy to kiss me first. Let's talk."

The interview room reeked of men desperate to cut any sort of deal for their freedom. I wanted out no less than anyone else, but the price had to be right and what she was asking—what I knew she was going to ask—was too much. The room

was dismal: two metal chairs, joints welded, chained to ring bolts in the floor on either side of a table, also welded and secured. They'd even thought to cage in the fluorescent lights so prisoners who were having a bad day couldn't rip out the bulbs and start stabbing people. Gray floor, gray walls, gray table and chairs, no windows. Welcome to life at FCI Danbury.

"I mean this sincerely," she said. "You're the victim of an honest-to-God miscarriage of justice. For me to even come here and say so is no small thing. You may have noticed the federal government's not in the habit of apologizing. But I am when there's a reason, and I'm genuinely sorry for what happened to you. Let's make this right."

"I'm touched, Miss Hunt. The answer's still *no*."

She straightened the folders before her. "If I've learned anything in this business, it's that reasonable people change their minds. You got tangled in a bad law. Only the politicians supported the Three Strikes sentencing guidelines. Great optics, right?—taking career criminals off the streets. The evening news eats it up. Your first two offenses weren't even crimes, Mr. Larson. *That's* the real crime here. The judges knew it too."

"Are you done? At the rec room they're showing reruns of *Gilligan's Island*."

It took me a decade at Danbury to learn how to breathe with the boulder American justice had rolled onto my chest. When the judge pronounced it, my sentence—twenty-five years to life with a minimum of twenty-five served—sounded like a joke given what I'd done or, rather, not done. The system ate me alive. More than once I prayed to be back in Ukraine under Stalin or Khrushchev or the long line of thugs who succeeded them. At least in the Soviet Union you never fooled yourself into thinking you'd get a fair trial. After a few years, I began making my peace with the facts: a wretched law had

put me behind bars, likely for the rest of my days—and no one was coming to the rescue.

“Buying Percocets on the street was . . . *misguided*,” she said, looking up from a file. “You ever hear of doctors? Why didn’t you get a prescription? Forgive me, but this could have been a legal purchase if you had just waited until morning.”

I struggled to hold back my bitterness, but on it came, at first a trickle and then a little more until I thought *why not* and let it run because bitterness feels so good—until it doesn’t, the way raking your fingernails across poison ivy feels good until it sets your skin on fire. This lady wanted news? I’d give her a bellyful: “Nora spent that whole day throwing up blood. You ever see that? I asked one of her doctors for a pill—for something, anything to get me through *my* pain so I could stay with her. The doctor said, ‘She’s the one who’s sick.’ I didn’t have time to shop around. I was in that much pain, holding my wife’s hand, cleaning her vomit when the nurses were too busy. You ever help somebody you love to die? It was two in the morning. I needed to get numb fast.”

My hands started shaking more than usual.

“Why not go to a bar?”

“The bars were closed.”

I should have lunged across the table and throttled her.

“She was young. It was tragic, but the system’s the system, Mr. Larson. What was the undercover cop supposed to do, *not* run you in? Even the judge was sympathetic. You got straight, unsupervised probation, which was the right call. But it was still a felony. Still Strike One and a brand-spanking new criminal record. No justice system can walk away from evidence. You bought the pills illegally.”

I stood to leave.

“Hear me out. You’ve got time. At least fifteen more years by my count.”

“You’re a real charmer.”

“Yes, I am. I also deal in facts. You’re sixty-six. You’ve got Parkinson’s. You walk like you’re seventy-six. The air in this place is damper than in my cellar, which has a dirt floor, and I’d bet a hundred bucks some kind of mold is already growing in your chest.” She scanned a second file. “Strike Two. Good God, the prosecutor was having a bad day. Probably had to make his numbers.”

Innocent doesn’t begin to describe what happened. I was helping a neighbor move and found some loose ammunition for a historic gun her husband owned, a rusty old thing. I thought nothing of putting the bullets in a pocket. That afternoon, a cop pulled me over for a broken taillight. He saw a drug conviction on his computer, told me to empty my pockets—and out dropped the bullets for an antique gun that wasn’t mine and didn’t fire. Felons can’t own guns or possess live ammunition.

Who knew?

She shook her head. “They weren’t your bullets. You had no intention of committing a crime. You were helping a neighbor. I wouldn’t have brought that case. My predecessor was . . . aggressive.”

I asked the guard to cuff me.

“Still, there was a law and you broke it. The second judge didn’t send you to prison either—again, the right call. I can get you out of here, Mr. Larson. And let’s not forget, there’s Grace to consider.”

The guard had already walked me a few steps down the corridor. I stopped, not quite believing what I’d heard. “You’d drag a child into this? Perfect. Now I know what I’m dealing with.”

She set the folders aside and stood, keeping the table between us. “Look, I’m decent enough. I check my kids’

homework every night. I go to PTA meetings. I volunteer at my church. But I happen to commute to and from hell every day of the week, and in case you hadn't noticed, you're living in hell right now. You're up to your eyeballs in flames, Mr. Larson, and I can get you out of here even though Strike Three . . . Strike Three was the real deal." She reached for the last folder. "Not twenty-five to life real, but real enough. What were you thinking, the insurance company wouldn't want its money back?"

"Gabby! You didn't read about Gabby?"

She ran a fingernail across the table.

"Ovarian cancer. After what happened to your wife? The same cancer? I cried when I read that, a single woman in her twenties with a four-year-old. I actually cried. You and your family got dealt a miserable hand. But other men get beaten down and don't go scamming insurance companies. Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money. That was Strike Three, a real one, and you were *out*. I read the sentencing memo. The judge wanted no part of giving you twenty-five to life, but he had no choice. You got caught up in a bad law, and here we are ten years later. You should have been out by now, and I'm prepared to help. But you need to cooperate. You know how this goes: You have to give to get. Work with me."

"There was a clinic in Sweden that used an extract of—"

"I *understand* all that. If it was my daughter, I'd have gone to the ends of the earth, too, looking for a cure. You'd already mortgaged your house to fly your wife to Mexico for treatments when her chemo failed. And let me guess, big brother Dima wasn't much help. He had all his money tied up in . . . *business*." She spit the word. "So you made a false insurance claim."

"Baseball's a stupid sport."

"Excuse me?"

“If Abner Doubleday didn’t make three strikes an out, I wouldn’t even *be* here. Why not a four-strikes law, or six?”

“Testify against your brother,” she called as I walked away. “I’m going to get him on tax evasion, and you know exactly where the money went. He’s guilty of a lot more, but I can’t prove sex trafficking yet.”

She was right. She couldn’t.

“It doesn’t bother you he built a highway from Ukraine to your grocery to traffic girls? The Justice Department’s aiming to shut down major trafficking rings. Your big brother’s whoring teenagers, Mr. Larson. They’re not much older than your granddaughter. Where’s the outrage? My gut tells me you’re a decent man.”

“I used to be.”

“I want him gone *now*. Testify for me and I’ll get you custody of Grace. And for God’s sake, get the child tested. If my mother and grandmother died of a bent BRCA gene, I’d want to know. It’s the year 2000! There are things she can do. . . . Surgeries. If you don’t take the deal, you’ll die in here.”

Not likely. I had her exactly where I wanted her.